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## Squatting

Diković, Jovana

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Many of the initial questions that animated debates in the 1970s remain relevant today. For example, what is the potential of the informal economy to contribute to growth, employment or innovation? Arguably, scholarship continues to work within many of the initial limitations created through the use of dichotomous thinking. The current state of the art provides important pointers for disentangling informal economies from a severely curtailed analysis that is situated in relation to capitalism and neoliberalism. However, there is still some way to go.

## Informal dwelling

### 5.1 *Squatting*

Jovana Dikovic

University of Zurich, Switzerland

Squatting is mostly an urban phenomenon. The term generally refers to informal housing whereby, for a variety of existential, legal, political and ideological reasons, people settle on vacant land or occupy abandoned buildings, both private and public. People who squat possess no legal title to land or building, pay no rent for the respective property and live there without any formal entitlement.

Alternative names, though not always with exactly the same meaning, are in use for squats. These are: informal settlements, spontaneous settlements, slums, shantytowns, favelas, ghettos and social housing. The numerous synonyms for someone who squats, i.e. a squatter, indicate the complexity of the phenomenon, its spread and a wide range of perceptions. The most common include: informal settler, illegal tenant, invader, thief, beatnik, homesteader and so on. It is estimated that approximately a quarter of the world's urban population lives in slums, with over 863 million slum dwellers in developing countries (UN-Habitat 2012–13). Squatting is considered to be a universal phenomenon. Widely known squatter communities include favelas in Rio de Janeiro, Neza-Chalco-Itza in Mexico City, Kibera in Nairobi, Shanyrak in Almaty, squatters around Metro Manila, Israeli squatters on Palestinian land in the West Bank, Christiania in Copenhagen and Rote Flora in Hamburg.

In urban areas, rapid growth of squats is to a large extent associated with intensified industrialisation in the world. Many poor migrants from villages move to cities seeking jobs and opportunities. As the size of the low-skilled, cheap labour force grows, the demand for affordable accommodation increases accordingly. Shortages of legal accommodation forces people to seek alternative housing solutions and pushes them

to the outskirts of cities, usually leading to the extension of existing settlements or the formation of new ones. Since large numbers of newcomers cannot meet the demanding financial and legal criteria for building permission, they start to illegally squat on private or public vacant land in order to build rudimentary shelter. For this reason, the developing world is faced with the growing conversion of rural land to urban use in city peripheries. As a consequence, reclassification of settlements from 'rural' to 'urban' has become one of the most significant determinants of urban population growth and expansion in the developing world today according to the UN-Habitat (2012–13: 30). Over time these new settlements become organised, vibrant and self-sustained communities, with diverse local economic and subcultural life. As one UN-Habitat expert said, 'Just as slums and slum dwellers need cities to survive, so do cities need slums to thrive' (Mumtaz 2001: 20). Nevertheless, city officials and property developers are not always benevolent towards squatter settlements and usually do not perceive them in such a positive way. That is the reason why squatter settlements all over the world continuously run battles against city administration and face threats of evictions and demolition of their settlements.

Although practices of squatting sporadically occurred in the past, the first big wave of squats emerged in developing countries and Western urban districts during the late 1960s and early 1970s. The second wave began in the 1980s in The Netherlands and from there spread further to Switzerland, Germany, Denmark and other Western countries (Mikkelsen and Karpantschhof 2001; see *Schwarzwohnen*, 5.2 in this volume) (see Figure 5.1.1). The growing and omnipresent practices of squatting since the 1980s have led many authors to identify them as a new urban movement (Pruijt 2003; Martinez 2007). The main characteristics of these movements are: illegality, in the sense that they violate private property rights; the subcultural character, displayed through symbols, messages, dress code and lifestyle; their association with youth; and organisational strength, as these social and political movements are well coordinated on local and international levels (see Martinez 2013: 866–7). Such tight interconnectedness, international cooperation and transnational coordination is impressive and becoming increasingly formalised. For example, an international squatter movements conference 'European Squatting Meeting' was held in Barcelona in June 2010 in order to discuss such burning problems of squatter movements as evictions, development of negotiating capacity in dealing with governments, and prospective options for institutionalisation of their position.



**Figure 5.1.1** Zurich Altstetten quarter.

Source: Author. © Jovana Dikovic.

Depending on the context, squatting can be perceived either as a crisis resolution or as a proactive strategy, or both in some cases. Five categories of squatting can be distinguished: (1) deprivation based squatting – when people squat in order to avoid homelessness; (2) squatting as an alternative housing strategy – a temporary housing solution when people face a lack of housing opportunities or cannot afford them; (3) entrepreneurial squatting – when people want to revive a particular urban district or building through different entrepreneurial services such as bars, clubs, factories, etc.; (4) conservational squatting – when the main aim is restoration and preservation of an old building or quart that is neglected by city officials; (5) political squatting – when direct action such as occupation of the building aims to transmit and address certain political and social messages (Prujit 2012). The latter includes diverse political activities such as protesting, political campaigning, networking workshops and engagement in various environmental issues locally or globally.

It can be argued that squatter movements all over the world share some common political ground. Many authors place them on the radical

left or left-libertarian, depending on the nature of their radicalism and opposition against the local or state government. Squatter movements challenge worldwide capitalism and neoliberal political agendas, with particular focus on the problems of house shortages, expensive housing, speculation on the property market and corruption in government administration. One of the main concerns of these movements is the gentrification of urban spaces, which they believe adversely affects the middle and lower classes and pushes them to the margins of urban spaces. According to this view, areas previously inhabited by lower social strata tend to become extremely expensive and practically unaffordable for them after rebuilding, thus accommodating only the needs of the wealthy. Even more fundamental for the squatter movement is undermining the idea that private property rights are absolute, which is viewed as central to major inequalities and injustices.

Given their prevailing characteristics, such as independence from the existing political, social and cultural establishment, anti-authoritarianism, emphasis on direct action as a means of political protest and autonomous lifestyles, squatter movements evoke strong, and often conflicting, reactions in society. Some perceive them as thieves, due to the fact that squatters violate someone's private property rights, or prevent someone from accessing their private asset. For others, squatters are pioneers in enabling social housing, in highlighting inequalities in society and in fighting for social justice.

Such duality in perceptions perhaps reflects the duality in the nature of squatting practices. These practices dwell on the important distinction made between the possessor and the owner of land – these roles are not as identical as could be assumed by the property rights. The time factor as well as active use of certain property can work in favour of an illegal possessor and to the detriment of the legal owner, or vice versa, depending on the legal system (civil code-based European or Anglo-Saxon common law). In other words, the time someone has spent in a certain property, or the activity someone has engaged in to keep the asset active, can be recognised as a legal basis for claiming certain rights over it (Jansen 2012: 158–65). These are the most common grounds used for launching legal claims over specific assets. Legal battles are essential for legal recognition and institutionalisation – the problems that both squatting communities and squatter movements share. *Inactivity* of an owner over certain property may open the way for another person to undertake an informal, or *active*, possession of the property in question. An owner's inactivity over property lends itself to informality and breeds different interpretations of property rights and, most importantly, their

relativisation. In this context, squatting appears as an informal sanction for the inactive ownership.

There are three possible legal outcomes in the disputes over squatted property. The first envisages the possibility for an illegal possessor (squatter) to acquire ownership due to his/her active usage of certain property. The second provides an illegal possessor (squatter) with some protection, resulting from the fact that the owner loses his claim to recover immediate ownership. The third outcome does not recognise any of the squatter claims (Jansen 2012: 153). The legal disregard of squatter claims normally leads to the eviction or demolition of squatter settlements.

Interestingly, the first two legal solutions rely on Roman law, which had provisions for accommodating the interests of squatters. This shows that the practice of squatting had been known since ancient times, unlike the organised political and social movements that have emerged since the 1980s in response to the problems of modern civilisation. Thus, squatting represents probably one of the oldest informal practices that has evolved in conjunction with the institution of property rights, and one of the most universal, driven by a belief in a fundamental human right to shelter and life.

## 5.2 **Schwarzwohnen** (GDR)

Udo Grashoff  
UCL, UK

*Schwarzwohnen* referred to illegal flat occupation in the German Democratic Republic. The literal meaning is ‘black (i.e. illegal) living’. The term denoted the undermining of the state allocation of housing by unsanctioned occupation, and thus effectively meant ‘squatting’ in the context of the East German communist regime.

A small minority of flat occupants rejected the term *Schwarzwohnen* because of the similar term *Schwarzfahren*, which means fare dodging on public transport. Nevertheless, *Schwarzwohnen* was widely used in the GDR by *Schwarzwohner* (those illegally occupying the accommodation) and administration staff as well (Grashoff 2011a). Besides *Schwarzwohnen*, other denominations were ‘living in teardown’ (*Leben im Abriss*) and ‘flat occupation’ (*Wohnungsbesetzung*). The latter term predominated in East Berlin, probably due to the proximity to the squatter movement (*Hausbesetzerbewegung*) in West Berlin. Also, in some parts of the GDR the term ‘maintenance habitation’ (*Erhaltungswohnen*) was in use.